

Sea Change

Emma Inglis explores the cliff-face garden at Cornwall's Minack Theatre, and talks to gardeners Niall and Jill Milligan about how coastal gardening is a very different proposition

PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

Hugging the steep cliff face at Porthcurno, near Penzance, the garden at Minack faces a unique set of challenges

COASTAL GARDENING

Vast pearly beaches, fiery sunsets, barnacle-encrusted rock pools – what would summer be without at least one trip to the seaside? Going on holiday to the coast may fuel dreams of a life by the ocean, but maritime gardening can appear intimidating and risky. Those who garden by the coast face a wave of unique challenges, such as high winds, salt-laden air, shallow dry soil, and excessive sun exposure.

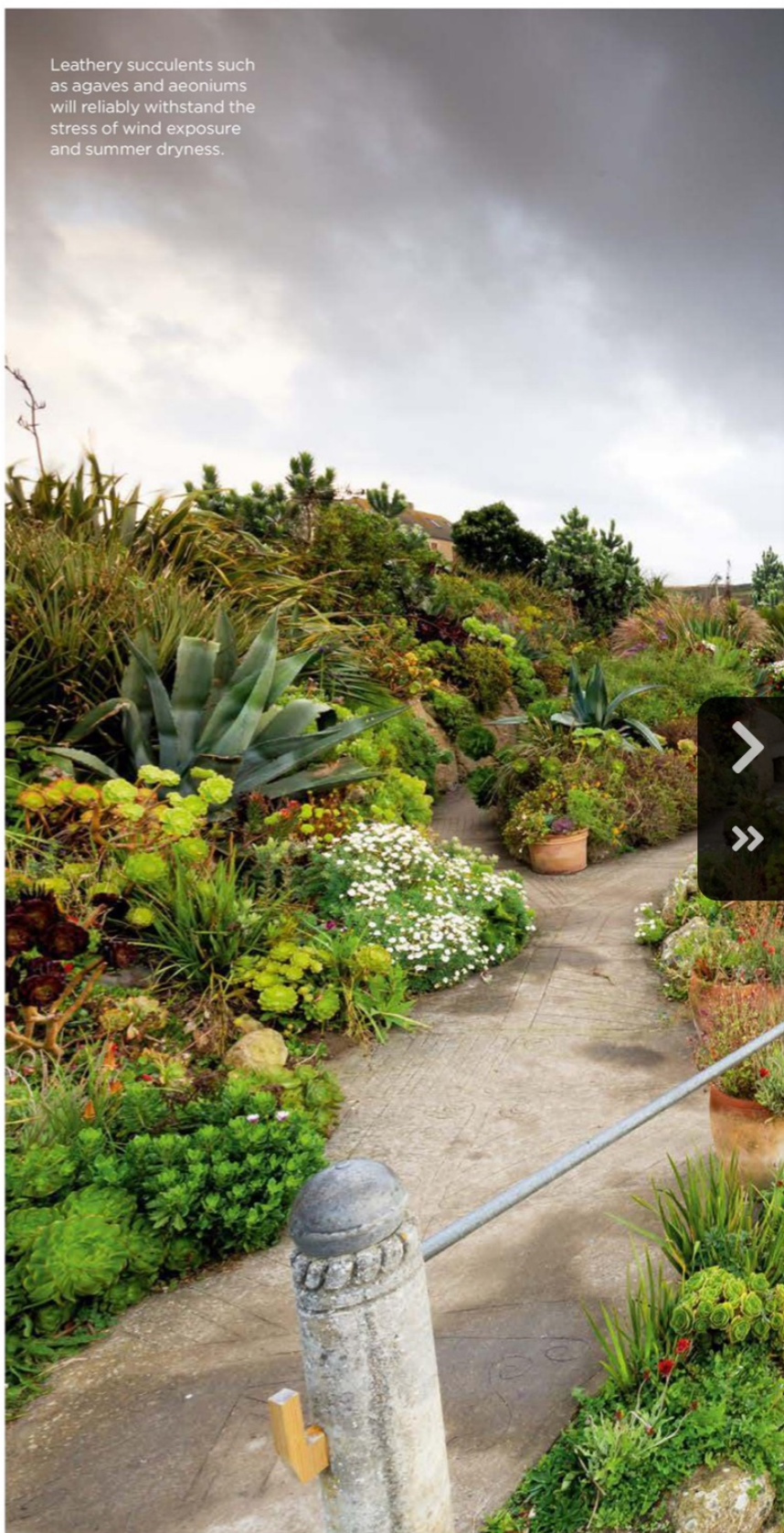
And yet the upsides – the ocean views, the lustrous iridescent light, a longer growing season with fewer frosty days, sea as blue as a cornflower – make it a challenge worth taking on. Two gardeners who do so with great aplomb are Niall and Jill Milligan, who have employed their skill and determination to create a garden in a place so precipitous, so exposed, and so full of rock that you can scarcely get a blade in the ground, let alone a plant.

Since 1998 the couple have been working at The Minack, an open-air theatre perched on a cliff above the Atlantic Ocean in Cornwall, where terraces tumble downwards to a stage suspended over the sea. This magical place exists because of the determination of one woman, Rowena Cade (1893-1983), who conceived, fashioned and constructed it over five decades, on a shoe-string budget. As any visiting theatre company will attest, it can be a stormy spot, clinging precariously to the cliff top, and yet Jill and Niall have created an extraordinary garden and as such are well-qualified to comment on the capricious nature of coastal horticulture. “The biggest surprise is that anything survives here at all!” says Jill. “If you look at the surrounding cliffs, they are completely devoid of vegetation apart from one or two things that manage to cling on, so intense is the weather here.”

One of the most important considerations for maritime gardeners is the need for a windbreak, which should be designed to filter out the worst of winter storms and salt-laden winds. The Minack is afforded some protection because it faces south-east, so the westerlies and northerlies run over the top of it, but the Milligans insist that the wind is still the main enemy. They favour *Olearia traversii* for use as a shelterbelt, but tamarisk, *Euonymus japonicus*, *ozothamnus*, *ulex*, *escallonia* and *Cupressus macrocarpa* will all stand up well to sea sprays, filter out salt and slow down wind.

Careful plant selection is also key. In the Milligans’ case, choice is shaped not just by the wind but the extreme dryness during at least six months of the summer. “Any plant in the garden has to be able to withstand both stresses,” explains Niall. “The plants that fare best are those that originate from island or coastal regions around the world. For example, many plants from the Canary Islands are dormant during summer and grow only during the

Leathery succulents such as agaves and aeoniums will reliably withstand the stress of wind exposure and summer dryness.





winter when it's cooler and wetter – aeoniums being the most obvious.”

There are plenty of aeoniums at the Minack. Their striking forms and beautiful succulent rosettes sprout from rocky outcrops and cascade over boulders and walls. “There are several hundred types represented in the garden,” says Jill. “An enormous number of which we grow ourselves from seed.” They sit alongside an equal number of agaves, whose soaring, fleshy spikes frequently stop awe-struck theatre-goers in their tracks. Aloes are another showstopper: in particular, *Aloe plicatilis* with its fan-like clusters of banana-shaped leaves and majestic *Aloe arborescens*, which has sword-like, spiny-edged foliage.

Other succulents also thrive, including echeverias, sedums, kalanchoes, crassulas, sempervivums and mammillarias. “One of the best families represented here are the mesembryanthemums from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa,” says Jill. “These are intensely coloured sprawling succulents that flower during the peak summer months and intermittently at other times of year.”

Right The brown-tipped wands of the bushy restio, *Chondropetalum tectorum*, which also looks good in containers.

Below left Fleshy green *Aeonium ciliatum*.

Below right The toothed, architectural rosettes of *Aloe arborescens*.

Bottom Mahogany *Aeonium* ‘Zwartkop’.



She adds: “The main enemy of succulent plants is water, something that we have far too much of here in the winter and so we’ll often lose plants such as aloes and agaves, which simply cannot cope with the high volume of water and low light levels. This obviously varies every year and sometimes we have a very good winter with a few losses, whereas in other winters we lose many plants.”

But it’s not just succulents that grow here. The 1.5-acre plot has many other genera. These include towering echiums from the Canaries with shimmering spires of flowers surrounding a sculptural central shaft; agapanthus; azure-coloured sea lavender (*Limonium perezii*); California poppies with orange, cup-shaped blooms; silver-blue sea holly (*Eryngium bourgatii*); kangaroo paw from Australia; tall, feathery *Stipa gigantea* and soft, wispy *Stipa tenuissima*; compact, rounded leucospermums with flower clusters that resemble pin cushions; irises, freesias and gladioli; fiery-coloured watsonias and red hot pokers (*Kniphofia*); and the dazzling Portuguese squill (*Scilla peruviana*), which disappears completely during summer and then reappears in early spring with a jaw-dropping display of gentian-blue flowers. “There really is something in flower for pretty much the entire year,” agrees Niall. “From the mass showing in May, June and July to the different flowers that appear during the autumn, winter and spring. In fact, it’s very rare that there is nothing to look at.”

Other more surprising specimens that you might expect only to see in glasshouses or on holidays much further afield, also grow well here. Or did.



The couple are still mourning the silver trees (*Leucadendron argenteum*) and the bird of paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*) from the Southern Cape that were destroyed two years ago when temperatures really plummeted. It was their first warning that gardening on the west coast of Cornwall does not always mean saying goodbye to cold winters. "It was the worst winter we've had in 20 years," says Jill. "The Beast from the East destroyed our 25-year-old silver trees, and so the only ones that are left are very small. It's a huge shame since they were one of the great glories of the garden. The bird of paradise plant has recovered after being frozen to the ground and is only now coming into flower again."

The couple stress how important it is in a coastal garden to plant smaller trees and shrubs, which acclimatise better and faster than larger plants to the extreme climatic conditions. "It's just pointless trying to grow large or leafy shrub-like plants by the sea because they simply don't survive and you're only going to be disappointed," explains Niall. "Having said that, there are one or two plants from coastal Japan and other areas, such as *Raphiolepis indica* and the metrosideros species from coastal New Zealand, which seem to be completely at home and unaffected by the salt gales."

As is the case with most beautiful gardens, the cornucopia of plant riches at the Minack comes at a price. This is not a garden that ticks over gently by itself. "Maintenance is pretty relentless, especially during the growing season," says Jill. "Certain



Clockwise from top left
Grey-green spikes of *Agave sebastiana*; a young silver tree, *Leucadendron argenteum*; low-growing glaucous *Euphorbia myrsinites*; benches and paths are hewn into the stone of the cliff face.

weeds are an absolute nightmare, particularly the bindweed, which is almost ineradicable."

The result of the Milligans' effort is an exotic pioneering garden, worthy of Rowena's Cade own visionary, back-breaking work. And it's solid proof that while gardening on our wild and windswept coast is undoubtedly a challenge, it's one that's well worth undertaking. ■

The Minack, Porthcurno, Penzance TR19 6JU. Opens daily, all year round, with performances from Easter to October. Check The Minack's website before your visit, since the gardens and theatre are closed to visitors when a play is taking place. Tel: 01736 810181; minack.com